

# Collapse of a nest tree used by Finch-billed Mynas *Scissirostrum dubium* in North Sulawesi

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Finch-billed Mynas *Scissirostrum dubium* are endemic to Sulawesi (formerly known as Celebes) and several smaller neighbouring islands in Indonesia (White and Bruce 1986). The species is highly gregarious, and during a visit to Tangkoko-Batuangus Nature Reserve (1°32'N 125°13'E), North Sulawesi, we commonly observed it foraging in the canopy of lowland forest in noisy flocks of up to 50 or more birds. These mynas nest colonially in the trunks of dead trees (Stresemann 1940, Watling 1983, White and Bruce 1986) and colonies may contain hundreds of pairs of birds (Stresemann 1940). It is believed that the heavy, pointed bill of this species is an adaptation for excavating nest holes (White and Bruce 1986).

On 13 May 1987, while walking through the reserve in lowland forest approximately 1 km from the sea coast, we discovered a large, recently fallen tree used by a colony of Finch-billed Mynas for nesting. The carcasses of 15 to 20 nestlings were visible on the ground next to the tree and additional searching revealed more young buried beneath broken wood debris or inside partially intact nest cavities. A total of 82 nestlings and one adult were eventually collected but more birds were undoubtedly present. No eggs were found. All but two of the birds were dead, with both of the surviving young still chirping weakly. Nearly all of the nestlings were similar in size and extent of feather development. Most were 8–10 cm long with pinfeathers present on the wings, tail and head. These birds were estimated to be about seven days old. Reddish rump feathers, which are a characteristic of subadult and adult plumages, were beginning to show on some of the birds. Two smaller young were also found, these being about 5 cm long and naked and estimated to be less than three days of age.

The nest tree was approximately 36 m tall with its top having previously broken off. It possessed large buttresses that were about 5 m tall and had a straight trunk with a diameter of 1 m at the tops of the buttresses. Several hundred nest cavities occurred in the upper 14 m of the snag, with the lowest cavity being approximately 22 m above the ground. Bole diameter in this section of the tree was about 0.6 m. Nest cavities were densely concentrated on all sides of the trunk. The entrance holes of most cavities were approximately 40 mm in diameter and cavity depths varied through 25–30 cm. Cavities were teardrop-shaped and angled downward at 30–60°.

Because two of the young mynas were found alive, it seems likely that the nest tree had fallen sometime during the previous 24 hours. No strong winds were noted on the previous day and the tree had probably toppled under its

own weight. The tree was badly rotted as indicated by the way the upper half of the trunk had broken apart on hitting the ground. No limbs or bark remained on the tree, further indicating that the tree had reached an advanced state of decay before falling.

From these brief observations, we conclude that colonies of Finch-billed Mynas are occasionally susceptible to catastrophic events such as the loss of occupied nest trees. Breeding appears to be highly synchronized and, within this colony, most hatching occurred in early May. Although the clutch-size of Finch-billed Mynas has not been previously reported, the scattered nature of the dead nestlings found at our site may indicate that only one young is produced per clutch. If this is indeed true, then this colony probably contained more than one hundred breeding pairs of mynas.

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## Letter: Was the 'Chinese' White-eyed River-Martin an Oriental Pratincole?

I have read with much interest E. C. Dickinson's tentative identification of the birds in the Chinese painting reproduced as the cover of *Forktail* 2 as White-eyed River-Martins *Pseudochelidon sirintarae*.